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Universal Basic Income

Basic Income as Ideology from Below

David Zeglen

ABSTRACT Most Left critiques of basic income assume a model of “false consciousness” on the part of basic income advocates. These critiques do not account for how desires for a basic income may also come from the material inversion of social relations that occurs under capitalism. Considered from the vantage point of fetishism and common sense, basic income demands appear rational rather than the product of false consciousness, which in turn informs how the left should organize “good sense” to build a hegemonic bloc.

Introduction

Recent Left critiques of basic income proposals often take the tone of a traditional ideology critique predicated on some notion of “false consciousness.” As I elaborate below, this form of ideology critique makes several strong claims that I incorporate into my own arguments about basic income. However, this critique also tends to overlook some of the main tasks of theorizing ideology in a social formation, namely how a concept like basic income can appeal to people, and how this appeal can be rooted in underlying material inversions of social relations in a capitalist society. As a consequence, strategies for engaging with the realities of capitalist domination and exploitation remain incomplete, at best. Therefore, I have chosen to narrowly focus on basic income from the vantage point of what can be crudely called “ideology from below,” as opposed to an analysis focused on how specific ideological apparatuses from above inculcate false consciousness. Furthermore, I argue that the concept of “surplus” functions as a rhetorical bridge between the common-sense appeal of basic income and a more revolutionary consciousness about capitalism that can lead to the negation of a demand for basic income in favor of more radical outcomes.

My argument rests on two claims: first, I assert that the desire for basic income can be categorized as an “objective thought-form.” An objective thought-form is a form of thought that is based on a person’s perception about capitalism as they directly experience it. Under capitalism, people experience their social relations with each other indirectly, since these relations are mediated by various things such as value, price, money, capital, and commodities. Thus, capitalism appears to people as an economic system of commodity production which involves things that regulate society as an independent, or natural, force beyond their control. Since people experience their social relations as social relations mediated by things, people’s thoughts about these social relations are socially valid even if capital’s essence remains concealed. Second, and relatedly, basic income as an objective-thought form constitutes a dimension of “good sense.” Good sense involves both an openness to new experiences as well as a sensitivity to comprehending reality according to direct empirical observations. In other words, it is a sense that avoids the seduction of metaphysical niceties and pseudo-intellectual superstitions but remains limited since it is undialectical thought. I suggest that objective thought-forms constitute a part of good sense, since the former is both empirical and

proto-ideological insofar as it is not regulated from above by ideological state apparatuses until after its appearance.

Since good sense is understood to be a site for organizing revolutionary consciousness, I argue that basic income as an objective thought-form be put in rhetorical motion with the concept of “surplus.” Since a surplus of wealth latently exists within capitalism on the level of objective thought-forms, I suggest that highlighting this notion can help in the struggle for a basic income, while also transcending this demand. Since class is about the production of surplus rather than income, and the capitalist state holds a monopoly on the exercise of violence, highlighting surplus can rhetorically emphasize the obstacles of a current conjuncture predicated on surplus populations while also illustrating the need to militantly organize to overcome these obstacles and create a hegemonic bloc. It is my hope that the terrain for the debate on basic income will shift slightly if these claims are taken up and incorporated into critiques of basic income from the vantage point of ideology from above.

1. Basic Income as an Objective Thought-Form

Although ideological state apparatuses continue to push various schemes for a basic income on the public, basic income is also a demand or desire that comes from workers as an objective thought-form. To review, Marx first introduces the concept of “objective thought-forms” in his description of the commodity fetish in *Capital, Volume 1*. As Marx argues, the commodity fetish is an inversion of social relations under capitalism whereby producers have ceded control to the commodity-form which now controls them. For Marx, this is not an inversion at the level of consciousness since, to the producers who are involved in this exchange-form, these social relations appear as what they are, which is social relations mediated between things. Hence Marx describes the appearance of these relations as socially valid, and therefore objective thought-forms.¹

Furthermore, the fetishes of capital include many other forms, including the wage-fetish. The worker experiences the wage-fetish by understanding wages as the price of labor, while profits are perceived as deriving solely from machines and/or circulation in the market according to supply and demand. When workers do not feel that they are getting a day’s wages for a day’s work, they take on the struggle for wage increases. This struggle occurs on the plane of the objective thought-form of the wage-fetish, since the struggle is about the wage for a day’s work rather than the surplus labor that is obfuscated by the wage-form. Thus, the challenge is to find an effective strategy that takes into consideration workers’ consciousness at the level of the objective thought-form, while being able to transcend it.

However, this is not to argue that workers shouldn’t fight for better wages even if the demand for better wages is framed according to “a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work.” Given the global historical record of anti-union violence perpetrated by the state on behalf of employers, it is clear that wage struggles enacted at the level of the objective thought-form pose a real threat to the capitalist class; not only do wage struggles threaten to reduce profitability, this reduction also impacts a given capitalist’s own ability to reproduce itself as it competes with other capitalists. Moreover, regardless of the level of class consciousness, workers must not renounce the labor struggle for improving wage levels, lest the working class become so degraded to depths past salvation.² But when workers do become so degraded that they become closer to the depths past salvation, they experience this degradation as an objective thought-form, via a crisis of individual consumption due to their stagnant wages.

Undoubtedly, workers do experience a crisis of individual consumption as evidenced by low savings and high debt combined with stagnant wages. But these conditions have

arisen from the relations of production themselves, specifically the rise of deindustrialization and concomitant reabsorption of industrial labor into the growing service sector because the service sector, unlike the industry sector, is relatively resistant to regular increases in labor productivity. As a consequence, productivity growth in the service industry remains relatively low, so profits are extracted predominately through longer hours at low pay.³ Indeed, the wage-form obscures the fact that it is not just a crisis of individual consumption for the worker, but a larger crisis of social reproduction. According to Kathi Weeks, a crisis of social reproduction is the intensification of the contradiction between capital accumulation and the ability for a worker to sustain and reproduce their own labor-power.⁴ Thus, a crisis of social reproduction is inherently about the dialectic between wages and surplus regardless of any political framing of that relationship. The questions that need to be more clearly elucidated during a crisis of social reproduction therefore involve asking who gets to decide on how social reproduction occurs, under what conditions, and through what structures.

These questions are not usually asked because under conditions of pauperization, immiseration, and stagnant wages, a demand for an intervention from the state in the form of a wage support system tends to emerge instead. As Daniel Zamora rightly points out, basic income is “a crisis demand, brandished in moments of social retreat and austerity.... The more social gains seem unreachable the more [basic income] makes sense”.⁵ Indeed, as Peter Sloman demonstrates in his 100-year survey of basic income proposals in the United Kingdom, the emergence of basic income demands follow a fairly predictable cyclical pattern since it “attracts the most support at times when the prospects for full employment and living wages seem the most uncertain, and recede from view as governments forge new economic and political settlements.”⁶

Given that the state can and does rely on a massive coercive apparatus in order to protect employers during wage struggles, and that a wage demand usually emerges at moments in which workers are most vulnerable, the notion that a basic income from the state could function as an emancipatory force should therefore be treated with caution. Indeed, such a pervasive notion suggests that there are corresponding fetish forms of the state.

I posit that the demand for a basic income from the capitalist state during a crisis in social reproduction is an objective thought-form, albeit one that is distinct from the classical wage-form. To differentiate the former from the latter, let us call basic income the “state-wage form.” And to elaborate on this argument, it is necessary to trace how the state-wage form has a corresponding state-wage fetish rooted in capitalist social property relations. As Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, the particular historical form the state takes under capitalism is predicated on the formal differentiation of the economic and the political spheres, and more specifically, a differentiation of political functions themselves and their separate allocation to the private economic sphere and the public sphere of the state.⁷ As mentioned earlier, the private economic sphere forms the basis of the various fetish-forms since economic social relations take the form of personal independence based on dependence mediated by things. Relatedly, the separated political sphere undergoes a parallel transformation. While under pre-capitalist social formations, specifically feudal ones, power is framed through social relations of personal dependence in the form of a clearly defined hierarchy (e.g. king → lord → serf), under capitalism the state is formally autonomous and impersonally abstracted from production as if the state is a neutral body, since it appears as indirectly social, gravitating above the economic.⁸

The suggestion that the political sphere has its own fetish forms based on an inversion of social relations goes against several orthodox arguments that fetish forms emerge exclusively from the social relations of production at the economic level. For instance, Engels argued that the realm of the political, as instantiated by the state, is the first

ideological power over man under capitalism and is therefore a form of social practices and institutions that ideologize consciousness from above rather than as a form of consciousness emerging from a fetish below.⁹ Likewise, David Wells emphasizes that the state form of the political realm under capitalism is irreducibly ideological, and not reducible to a fetish.¹⁰ However, while Althusser famously dismissed the fetish argument in *Capital, Volume 1*, his theorization of a social formation as a totality of relatively autonomous instances—namely the economic, political, and ideological—can be extended such that each instance has its own associated logic of fetishism, and consequently their own distinct fetish forms, that are different from ideological apparatuses. Therefore, the political instance contains a state-fetish that forms the basis for the state wage fetish form.

Furthermore, the state wage fetish form explains why arguments in favor of a universal basic income run aground so quickly. Indeed, the demand for a basic income is often framed as a political demand from the capitalist state, as if the state were actually above the interests of capitalism and can be won on that terrain. It is no wonder that universal basic income is discussed in such glowing terms of being able to do so many things if actually implemented, save for the fact that the capitalist state would never implement an adequate form of universal income to do all the things its proponents claim it would do. As Alex Gourevitch and Lucas Stanczyk point out, “the only way an adequate universal basic income could ever be implemented presupposes an organized working class that already has effective control over the shape and the direction of the economy We should think through not how [UBI] will renovate capitalism, but its emancipatory purpose in an already functioning institutional socialism.”¹¹ Likewise, Daniel Zamora states that “the power relations needed to establish [a truly transformational] level of UBI would constitute an exit from capitalism” that presupposes the exit first.¹² Therefore, there is a specific political challenge in fighting for basic income on the level of the objective thought-form of the state-wage fetish, as history demonstrates.

Indeed, the historical view illuminates how the modern capitalist state would likely implement a basic income today. Basic income schemes, albeit in a different form, began at the moment of primitive accumulation in England when the recently-landless, jobless, and homeless led to the codification of the English Poor Laws.¹³ As John Clarke argues, via the payment of a few shillings, the Poor Laws were a calculated attempt to stave off unrest and social dislocation while ensuring that income relief was lower than the lowest wages on offer so that the unemployed would not find relief a better option than the worst forms of paid work.¹⁴ Marx also vividly illustrates the consequences of the poor laws in *Capital, Volume 1*. In the late 18th century, handloom weavers in England were being displaced by new weaving machines like the power looms, leading to impoverishment among the newly-displaced handloomers. In response to the workers immiseration, local magistrates devised a basic income payment via parish relief, which would be given to displaced workers so that they could reproduce themselves. However, as Marx notes, this basic income acted as a wage subsidy for companies since they could continue to pay low wages, while not needing to replace the workers with machines all at once because labor costs were so low. As a consequence, basic income exacerbated and strung out the handloom weavers who were in competition with the machines, and as Marx states, “this tragedy dragged on for decades.”¹⁵ Sloman also concludes that over the past 100 years in the UK, conservative, liberal, and social democratic politicians invariably gut the “universal” out of various basic income schemes and ensure that the income being proposed is always substantially lower than the cost of living.¹⁶

Despite this history, it is still reckless to abandon the struggle over a state wage just because it occurs on the plane of the state wage-fetish, just as Marx argues that it is

similarly reckless to abandon the struggle over wage increases simply because said struggle occurs on the plane of the wage-fetish. Indeed, what the wage struggle and the state-wage struggle have in common beyond their respective roots in a fetish logic is that they are both utterly necessary for organizing workers and temporarily improving their lives, while also being completely inadequate in addressing the deeper structural contradictions of capitalist social property relations and the power of the state. Therefore, the question remains about how to both address the struggle for a basic income while leveraging this struggle into more transformative demands for a socialist society.

2. The State Wage Fetish as a Part of Good Sense

Before suggesting how basic income can be channeled into a vision for workers, it is important to stress Marx's point that an objective thought-form operates both on the level of social reality and practical consciousness. As a consequence, objective thought-forms cannot be banished by rational argumentation since they are deeply anchored in socio-economic reality. As Marx states, "even when scientifically disproved, the fetish's everyday validity and efficacy remain unbroken, since the actual agents of production themselves feel completely at home in these estranged and irrational forms . . . for these are precisely the configurations of appearance in which they move, and with which they are daily involved."¹⁷ Yet, Left critiques of basic income often suggest that advocates suffer from a false consciousness that can only be remedied with empirical and rational arguments. For instance, Alex Gourevitch and Lucas Stanczyk argue that there is a "basic income illusion" that blinds advocates, and as the authors demonstrate, their responsibility is to concretely demystify this illusion for what it is.¹⁸ Likewise, Daniel Zamora suggests that a universal basic income is an irrational demand, and claims that it is an idea "formulated in complete abstraction from the existing world and real people" as a kind of non-realist political philosophy.¹⁹ While the content of these critiques are basically correct, the mischaracterization of the demand for a basic income becomes a category mistake for a revolutionary strategy.

To clarify this point, it is helpful to situate fetishized objective thought-forms within Gramsci's notion of "common sense." According to Gramsci, common sense involves the inherently unsystematic and incoherent assemblage of truisms and popular knowledge, which is both heterogeneous and contradictory while also relatively rigidified.²⁰ Common sense is both the site where ideological state apparatuses from above exploit incoherencies from below and insert new ones. But within common sense there also resides good sense, which Gramsci argues is the healthy nucleus of common sense. Good sense is characterized by an "experimentalism" and a "direct observation of reality, though empirical and limited" since it is undialectical.²¹ Although Gramsci did not seem to show much interest in fetish-forms, it is logical to argue that fetishized objective forms make up a part of good sense, since they are both empirical and proto-ideological insofar as they are not regulated from above by ISAs until after their expression.²²

If the state fetish-forms a part of good sense, this has implications for labor organizing strategies. In her 2011 book *Common Sense: An Intellectual History*, Sophia Rosenfeld argues that organic intellectuals must pluck those moments of good sense like gold nuggets from the river of common sense and insert them directly into progressive political narratives.²³ However, as Kate Crehan rightly argues, Rosenfeld overlooks the complicated dialectical relationship between good sense and coherent political philosophies that can re-organize common sense.²⁴ Gramsci actually argues that moments of good sense require elaboration and cultivation by organic intellectuals who can put those moments into a dialectical relationship with other concepts. Furthermore,

organic intellectuals do not exist simply as autonomous individuals that produce knowledge. Rather, organic intellectuals are members of political organizations that produce knowledge together. In other words, organic intellectuals become organic through their connection to political organizations that struggle to become a historical force on the terrain of economic production.²⁵

Therefore, formulating a successful revolutionary narrative requires moving beyond various critics of basic income's wooly commitments to a socialist politics. After his demolition of the impossible economics behind universal basic income, Zamora concludes that we should "reconnect with the postwar period's emancipatory heritage,"²⁶ while Gourevitch and Stanczyk similarly finish their piece arguing that socialists need to "build a new working-class consciousness."²⁷ These seem like obvious points that socialists can broadly agree upon and yet there is no clear rhetorical strategy or narrative for how to accomplish this within a political organization. Indeed, the question boils down to a double bind regarding the state's position in relation to basic income: what kind of narrative can encapsulate both the necessity for a demand for a basic income from the capitalist state, while acknowledging the realities of the limitations of the capitalist state to offer a universal basic income, thus necessitating the historical negation of the said state?

By way of a conclusion, I propose that one answer to this question regarding the absolutely necessary and yet woefully inadequate proposal for a basic income is to take the state wage, as an objective thought-form that makes up an aspect of good sense, and put it in rhetorical motion with the concept of "surplus." I suggest this because surplus can function as a bridge between objective thought forms and revolutionary consciousness.

From the position of an objective thought-form, the source of funding for a state-wage/basic income payment plan comes from the state's garnishing of wages that have been earned as the price of their labor (rather than their labor power). Undoubtedly, this experience gives certain ideologists the pretext to incorrectly situate this "taxation as theft" as the fundamental cause of the misery of the people. Nonetheless, more generous accounts see taxation as a necessary pooling of wealth to help alleviate the misery of the people, even if it comes from wages earned as the price of one's labour. Therefore, in the redistribution of wealth via taxation there is an inherent acceptance that there is more wealth than necessary for survival being generated—a surplus if you will. Referring to a state-wage/basic income payment plan as a surplus wage or designating funding models to deliver a basic income as an economic surplus model illustrates that there is this pool of wealth generated in excess of what is necessary to live while detracting from the stigma that "income" must be earned through work. Certainly, in America social security is perceived to be more deserving as a social program than other welfare programs due to the former's relationship to work. Thus, it is not inconceivable that any proposed basic income program is dead on arrival since it easily lends itself to being framed as income for the "undeserving poor," much like the way current welfare programs are perceived by the public. However, the idiom of surplus avoids this problem. Indeed, Alaska's version of a state-based basic income—the Alaska Permanent Fund—refers payments to citizens as a "dividend" rather than an income, which has arguably helped maintain the popularity of the fund despite being a historically conservative state.

Once basic income as surplus is established, organic intellectuals could make a further iteration of surplus that could organize common sense dialectically to see where this wealth is generated. As mentioned above, the notion of a basic income reinforces the solipsistic notion of class being based upon individual income and personal consumption choices while continuing to hide the distinction between necessary labor and surplus labor. However, the introduction of the concept of surplus can lead to questions about

how a society produces more output than is consumed and where this surplus comes from, i.e. from exploitation in production. In essence, the objective should be to change the definition of class based on income to class qua surplus. Indeed, as Richard Wolff points out, it is capitalism's organization of the surplus that eventually negates movements towards egalitarianism based on wealth redistributions like the basic income, so it is control of the surplus that the Left must desire.²⁸

Furthermore, class qua surplus speaks to the current conjuncture in a way that is often ignored in critiques of basic income. Instead of fighting for a basic income, critics like Gourevitch and Stanczyk alternatively propose a general recommitment to building a new working-class consciousness using traditional tried-and-true methods like organizing in the workplace. Although this is common sense in the abstract, the current conjuncture is defined by an intensification of "unity-in-separation" that strongly mitigates against successfully organizing in the workplace. As Endnotes argues, unity-in-separation involves "people's interdependence on the market, which comes at the expense of their capacities for collective action."²⁹ As mentioned above, there has been a massive sectoral shift from industry to services under late capitalism. Consequently, Endnotes argues that service jobs—which are not prone to a mechanization that makes workers' jobs similar to each other—are becoming less homogenous and therefore making it harder and harder to form a collective class identity.³⁰ Thus, unity-in-separation intensifies since the extension of capitalist relations increasingly separates workers from each other with radically different labor conditions in services while they become increasingly dependent upon one another to survive.

However, linking surplus to basic income affords the opportunity to theorize the current conjuncture in terms of Marx's theory of surplus populations. According to Marx, a surplus population is defined as a group of workers without regular access to work (either partially, or wholly unemployed) and are surplus relative to the needs of capital's demand for labor.³¹ Furthermore, there are three main branches of the surplus population: floating (the recently unemployed); latent (the about to be unemployed due to sectoral or technological shifts); and stagnant (the irregularly employed).³² In light of the massive sectoral shifts to services occurring in the global economy, Endnotes argues that the stagnant surplus population is increasing significantly since it is in services where a large portion of the surplus population ends up, "particularly in the low-wage, super-exploited section and in the informal, self-exploiting section."³³ Indeed, this is the general explanation for the crisis in social reproduction that has promoted a demand for a basic income in the first place. Thus, the theory of surplus populations frames the present in a way that enables the Left to strategize according to the problems of the current conjuncture. In fact, any call to organize the workplace has to wrestle with this problem of surplus.

Finally, as Perry Anderson points out, while capitalist social formations are dominated by culture and thus require the kind of rhetorical shaping that can be conducted by organic intellectuals in order to form hegemony, they are ultimately determined by the coercive nature of the capitalist state.³⁴ Therefore, any socialist strategy must be prepared to confront the determinant role of violence exercised by the state when fighting for the kind of world that would make a truly universal basic income possible. This is not to advocate a romanticized unity of the surplus population from a horizontal movement into a decentralized multitude that will overthrow capitalism; on the contrary, the sheer diversity of surplus populations according to differential positions in relation to the labor process makes this task extremely difficult. And yet, we can still say that it is necessary to take literally Marx's definition of the surplus population as a "reserve army," albeit one that has not yet been disciplined and organized to oppose an inherently oppressive state

apparatus. Therefore, surplus as an organized, disciplined, revolutionary surplus is a necessary narrative move organic intellectuals ought to make to help form, and undergo the formation of, a hegemonic bloc. Undoubtedly, more work is required to further substantiate many of the claims made in this paper, but I hope that they nonetheless provide some starting points into rethinking socialist theory, strategy, and proposals for basic income.

Notes

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11. Alex Gourevitch and Lucas Stanczyk, “The Basic Income Illusion,” *Catalyst* 1, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 154. 
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16. Sloman, *Universal Basic Income*. 
17. Marx, *Capital*, 969. 
18. Gourevitch and Stanczyk, “The Basic Income Illusion.” 
19. Zamora, “The Case Against Basic Income.” 
20. Kate Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 46. 
21. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 328, 348. 
22. Indeed, in his seminal *Commodity Aesthetics, Ideology, and Culture*, W.F. Haug similarly proposed that fetishized objective thought-forms constitute part of the proto-ideological that congeals with ideological discourses in the meeting point of common sense. As argued in Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology*, 50–51, 253. 
23. Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: An Intellectual History* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 189–190. 

24. Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 48. 
25. Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense*, 148–149. 
26. Zamora, “The Case Against Basic Income.” 
27. Gourevitch and Stanczyk, “The Basic Income Illusion,” 176. 
28. Richard D. Wolff, “Marx’s Concept of Class,” *Monthly Review Online* (2018), <https://mronline.org/2018/03/28/marxs-concept-of-class/>. 
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 [Bio](#)



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